Reporter Discovers Japan

By COURTNEY TOWER

BLOSSOMS A FAKE... NOT SO THE PEOPLE

Courtney Tower is a former reporter of The Daily Colonist staff. He's on an earn-as-he-goes tour of the Far East and beyond. He hopes to visit Red China, Formosa, India and the lands between. He proposes to write periodically for The Islander. This is his first story.

A HOLY HILL in Japan was alive with cherry blossoms, and simple folk, like tourists, marvelled.

For a moment the suddenly-chanced-on scene had an almost supernatural air. All around was January brown and faded green in the setting of ancient Nara, peaceful font of this land's religion and Mecca to the devout. Sunlight splashed over the glorious hill alone. If you got too close, you might break the spell.

The spell soon shattered.

The cherry blossoms proved to be paper, tied to the trees. The sunlight was aimed from high-powered floodlamps. If you got too close you were abruptly ordered away. A movie company was on location.

It was just an amusing little incident. But it neatly wrapped up what might most strike any visitor to Japan. That is the fascinating contrast, and often deep struggle, seen at every hand between the traditional old and the driving, pushing new.

It would be presumptuous after a visit of just two fleeting months to pretend to "explain Japan," a country in a hurry, experiencing an immense post-war economic, political and social upheaval. So this is merely a pot pourri of impressions and experiences.

I learned that the movie company grinding out an epic on the holy hill was part of an industry that produces more films than does Hollywood. Japanese films are winning high international recognition.

The several devout Buddhists and Shintoists in our group, who had come to Nara on a New Year pilgrimage, seemed proud of the film-makers as a symbol of Japan's rushing progress. But they soon turned back with greater interest to the great, looming Buddha in the largest wooden structure in the world, and worshipped inside the world's oldest wooden building.

OLD RITUALS

Sweet, grandmotherly Mrs. Kinu Kagawa has more modern appliances than most in her middle-class home at Kyoto. But for days before the three-day New Year observance, when no food can be cooked nor work done, hers and a neighbor family worked outside with primitive tools in a ritual centuries old.

Rice steamed over an outdoor fire was put in a huge bowl-shaped rock and pounded by a son-in-law, or one of the sturdy, cheerful daughters, into a sticky mass that was then moulded into rice cakes. The "mochi" was among the cold foods eaten during the New Year—with various fish preparations, different beans, rice and many other dishes . . . all good. It also has religious significance.

A mochi cake was always provided for the household god, high on a shelf at the Kagawa home, and it is a New Year offering at Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Mrs. Kagawa also would set a little bowl of rice before the god prior to each meal. Her family remains devoutly Buddhist, too.

THOUGH HER HOME is modern, it remains typically Japanese with "tatami" straw mat floors, sliding doors, no chairs, and cold draughts chasing each other everywhere with malicious abandon. This foreigner was glad she hadn't got so modern as to discard "hibachis," charcoal braziers to which I could huddle up close.

In fact, cramped though the Japanese are with 92,000,000 people jammed onto four tiny islands totalling about 140,000 square miles, they seem to love the wide open spaces.

Doors and windows are left wide open to the chill winter air all the time. Only the sizzling hot Japanese baths, which keep the body warm for a long time afterwards, provide any relief. The colorful stores have no fronts, and clerks cluster blue-fingered around the inevitable "hibachis."

One of the chillier public buildings I hit was the "Lyric Theatre" at Takarazuka, which is sending a troupe of classic dancers to Vancouver's art festival this August.

It is also the only theatre I've ever seen where to get in you have to buy a ticket to a zoo . . . then you walk through an entertainment centre area to where you buy a ticket to see the girls. It's worth it.

In all the cities most streets are narrow and have a bazaar-like atmosphere.

Homes are cramped together in a painful manner, often being little rooms in the back of shops that might sell noodles, the latest electronic equipment or strange-looking fish. There are often no sidewalks. Fighting it out, helter skelter, are pedestrians, motorcycles, cars, and boys on bicycles carrying steaming bowls of noodles, to name a few.

WESTERN DRESS predominates, sometimes in startling combinations. But everywhere the colorful kimonos are still seen, people clopping along in wooden clogs, young women with babies on their backs and pitiful old women bent double under the results of a day's scavenging.

The department stores are big and bulge with goods. One in Toyko had everything from a shrine at the top to a frantic stock market on the first floor.

COAL FROM B.C.?

Japan has a prosperous look. Department store sales last year jumped 9.2 per cent over 1957 to about $915,000,000 (Canadian). Factories are busy, and the economic chaos left by the war and loss of half of Japan's industries seems to be straightening out. Steel output has hit 12,000,000 tons annually, 2,000,000 more than before the war, and two industrialists predicted to me it would rise further.

Negotiations to buy British Columbia coal, at least 100,000 tons this year for a start, are being carried on with considerable expectation of success.

The politicians say living standards are at their country's highest.

But of course, the politicians aren't in particularly good favor right now. The people, though still new to the post-war experiment of a democratic form of government, seem to think their representatives bicker too much. Prime Minister Nobosuke Kishi's pro-Western Liberal-Democrat regime is split by internal dissension and seems ready to topple. But that isn't likely to do the opposition Socialist party much good. Smaller and weaker, it is also the camp of innumerable warring factions.

TOKYO, with over 8,500,000 people, the world's largest city, is working at an incredible rate to keep up with the growth. New streets, bridges and other developments seem to be going up piecemeal with the hope that, like Mr. Gaglardi's Malahat Highway, all will eventually smooth out into well-planned order.

Throughout this country can be seen construction projects of every sort. Whatever they are, women work with the men; big trucks, cranes and other heavy equipment can be seen working alongside men and women who shovel sand or dirt into wicker baskets, sling two baskets over their shoulders on a yoke, and trudge away.

The yoke is also seen on the farms. Mechanization is rare on these little terraced plots that go up mountainsides and down to the roads, using every inch of land. More often, men and women water their rice, vegetables and tea from wooden pails that hang from yokes stretched across their shoulders.

Thatched huts and oxen pulling carts of wood are common sights in the countryside, only a mile or two, for example, from the big industrial city of Osaka.

"See you layla, allagayla . . ." In Japan, customs are changing.

Shrines and temples are many and beautiful, some richly exotic and some small and simple, many with ponds and gardens and peaceful walks. Kyoto, cultural and religious centre of Japan, has more than 2,000. Everywhere, they are well attended, and one authority said that despite modern pressures, traditional religious faith is strengthening, if anything.

Even the nation's youth, in a rebellious foment now due to lots of education but few bright job opportunities, coupled with drastically reduced parental authority, are not forsaking religion in the numbers people think, he said.

I was fortunate to meet several Japanese people in their own homes, as well as the more casual meetings, and invariably found them friendly, fun-loving and open in their conversations.

I was invited to one home to spend the New Year; traditionally a strictly family affair. Only one member spoke any English and I had picked up only the more obvious Japanese words. But that posed little problem and things progressed to where bright, cute, Shinobu, 8, was able to burst out, as later translated: "You know, he laughs just like we do."

THE THREE MAIN national daily newspapers have circulations of 6,500,000, 6,000,000, and 3,500,000, and there are numerous big league television and radio services. Advertisers make full use of these, but don't look down on the old methods, either.

I was awakened from my (very comfortable) bed on the floor of a Japanese inn one morning by the sound of a clarinet and drums, looked out to see a military-like procession thumping by, with chalk-faced men solemnly bearing banners. They were advertising a new noodle shop.

And, inside an important and covered temple at Asakusa, Tokyo, are two sacred-looking stone tablets with Japanese characters written on them. They turned out to be bearing the names of two politicos, rivals for the governorship of Tokyo prefecture, vote-hunting among the faithful.

The traditional Japanese theatre arts, very contrary to our notions of drama and music, are very much alive. European classical and American jazz music is very popular, however, and the young set are rock 'n' rollers.

"See ya layla, allagayla," warbled one very tall, very skinny young ducktail-haircut singer in tight pants to a fellow gyrator around a microphone in one Tokyo coffee club I visited, "Aftawila, clocadila," answered his pal, and fresh-faced teen-aged girls screamed with delight.